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An Archaeological Assessment of Hailey Wood Camp, Sapperton, Gloucestershire: a Roman temple complex in the Cotswolds?

By THOMAS MOORE

Introduction

Hailey Wood Camp (O.S. Nat. Grid SO 96450034) lies c. 5 km south-west of Cirencester on the boundary between the parishes of Sapperton and Coates (Fig. 1). The camp is situated c. 130 m above O.D. on a spur at the head of a valley and is overshadowed by taller hills to the north and the south. To the south-east, lower down the valley, is a spring forming one of the principal sources of the river Thames and overlooked by Trewsbury House hillfort. Hailey Wood Camp, occupying a prominent position with a commanding view down the valley towards the source of the Thames, is a double-ditched enclosure with an apparent inner bank (Fig. 2). It is visible on aerial photographs, which appear to show a number of associated buildings to the south-east of the main enclosure (RCHM 1976, plate 49).

In 1996 it was noted that the site was undergoing significant plough damage. As a result the author decided that an accurate survey to establish the nature and date of the site was needed. An analysis of previous work on the monument was carried out and both surface and geophysical surveys were undertaken. It was hoped that they would provide a more detailed picture of the site and would enable its comparison with similar enclosures elsewhere in the country.

Archaeological Background

Major Daubney of Dockem House, Coates, identified the site as being archaeological in the 1950s (O'Neill and O'Neill 1952). At that time the bank and ditches remained visible on the ground. There is no evidence of previous investigation of the site by antiquaries. In close proximity to the site there is evidence of a villa destroyed in 1844, during the construction of a railway tunnel, and it is possible that this 'villa' may have been associated with Hailey Wood Camp.

The first interpretation of site was in the early 1950s by the O'Neills, who described the enclosure as having 'corners very reminiscent of Roman work' (O'Neill and O'Neill 1952, 25). At that time it was 'almost a true rectangle', c. 70 × 60 m with the bank c. 0.5 m high. Since then, ploughing of the site appears to have greatly reduced the height and definition of the features. It was also noted that '100 yds due north there is a raised part of the field which could be interpreted as a cambered road leading to the north side of the camp' (ibid.). That feature is no longer visible on the ground and it was not noted by the Royal Commission's 1969 survey (RCHM 1976, 99). However, the feature may be visible on some aerial photographs of 1990 (e.g. NMR 4368/31/1990). The artefacts retrieved by the O'Neills consisted of a single sherd of 'Roman Red-ware'. The large amount of pottery retrieved by field walking in 1996 suggests

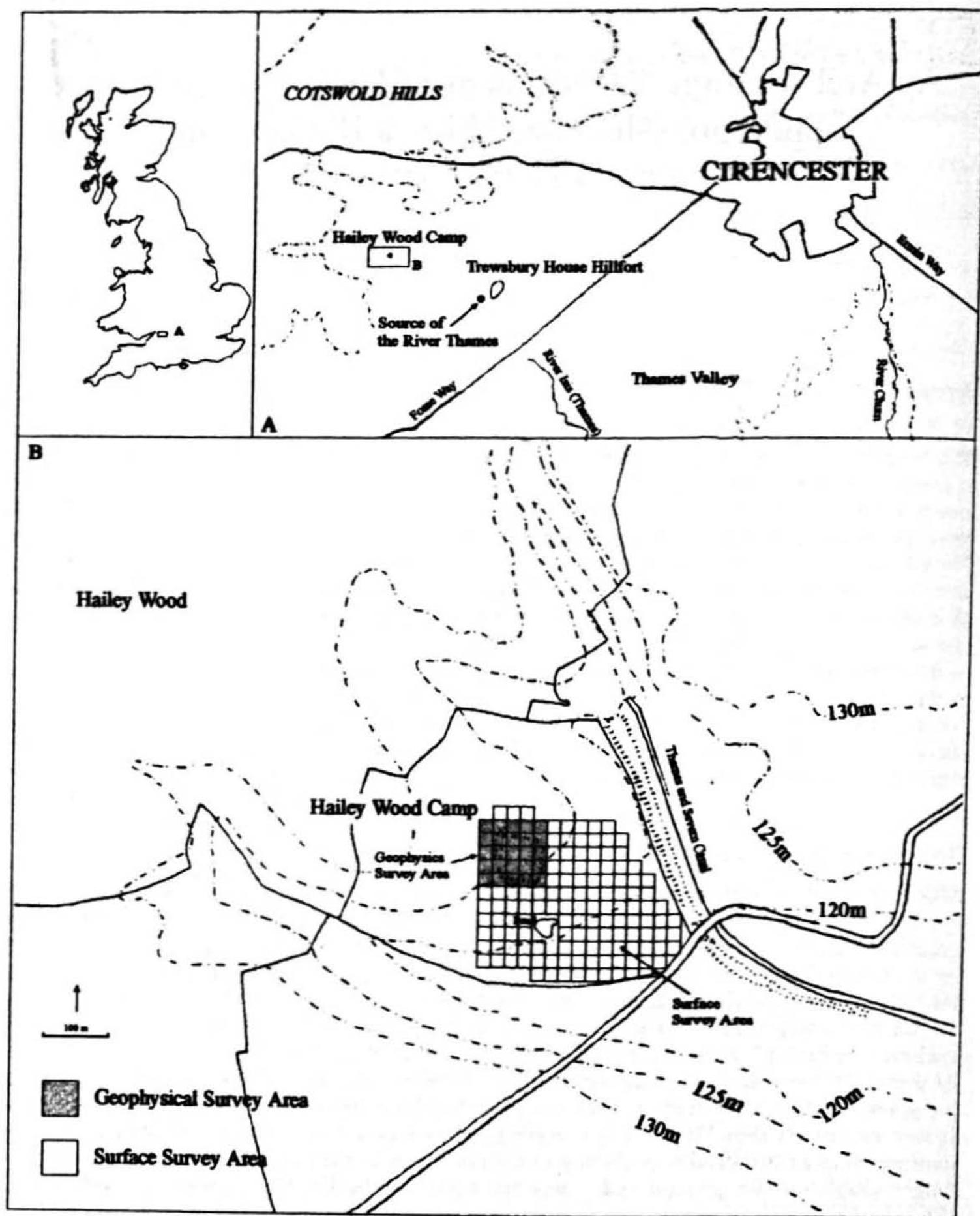


Fig. 1. Location of Hailey Wood Camp and the areas of the surface and geophysical surveys.



Fig. 2. Aerial photograph (1990) of Hailey Wood Camp, north to top (Crown copyright, National Monuments Record, English Heritage).

either that the O'Neills made only a brief field-walk of the site or that ploughing has cut deeper into the archaeological features.

The O'Neills claimed that the Hailey Wood site was military in nature, most probably a temporary camp established during the Roman conquest. They compared the site with others in the Cotswolds, which were stated to 'illustrate the ebb and flow of Roman conquest' (O'Neill and O'Neill 1952, 32). Many of the other sites have since been discredited as Roman military camps (RCHM 1976) and the O'Neills' interpretation seems simplistic.

The site was also observed and recorded as a villa by J.K. St. Joseph (1969, 128). He described it as 'a basilican type building ... seen to be subdivided into a number of rooms' and having 'a corridor running the length of the main block'. It appears that he may have been describing the largest of the outer buildings indicated on aerial photographs of 1951 (see RCHM 1976, plate 49). The Royal Commission in 1969 (*ibid.* 99) undertook the most detailed survey of the site. It included a topographic survey and retrieved pottery datable to the 2nd–4th centuries A.D. The Commission considered the site a 'complex conceivably religious'.

In recent years seven Roman curse tablets have been retrieved from the site by metal detectorists (see below) (Roger Tomlin pers. comm.). There has also been a suspicion that the site was being plundered and that other material, particularly coins and other metal objects, may have been removed (John Paddock pers. comm.). That suspicion suggested that a more detailed analysis of the nature of Hailey Wood Camp was overdue.

Survey Results

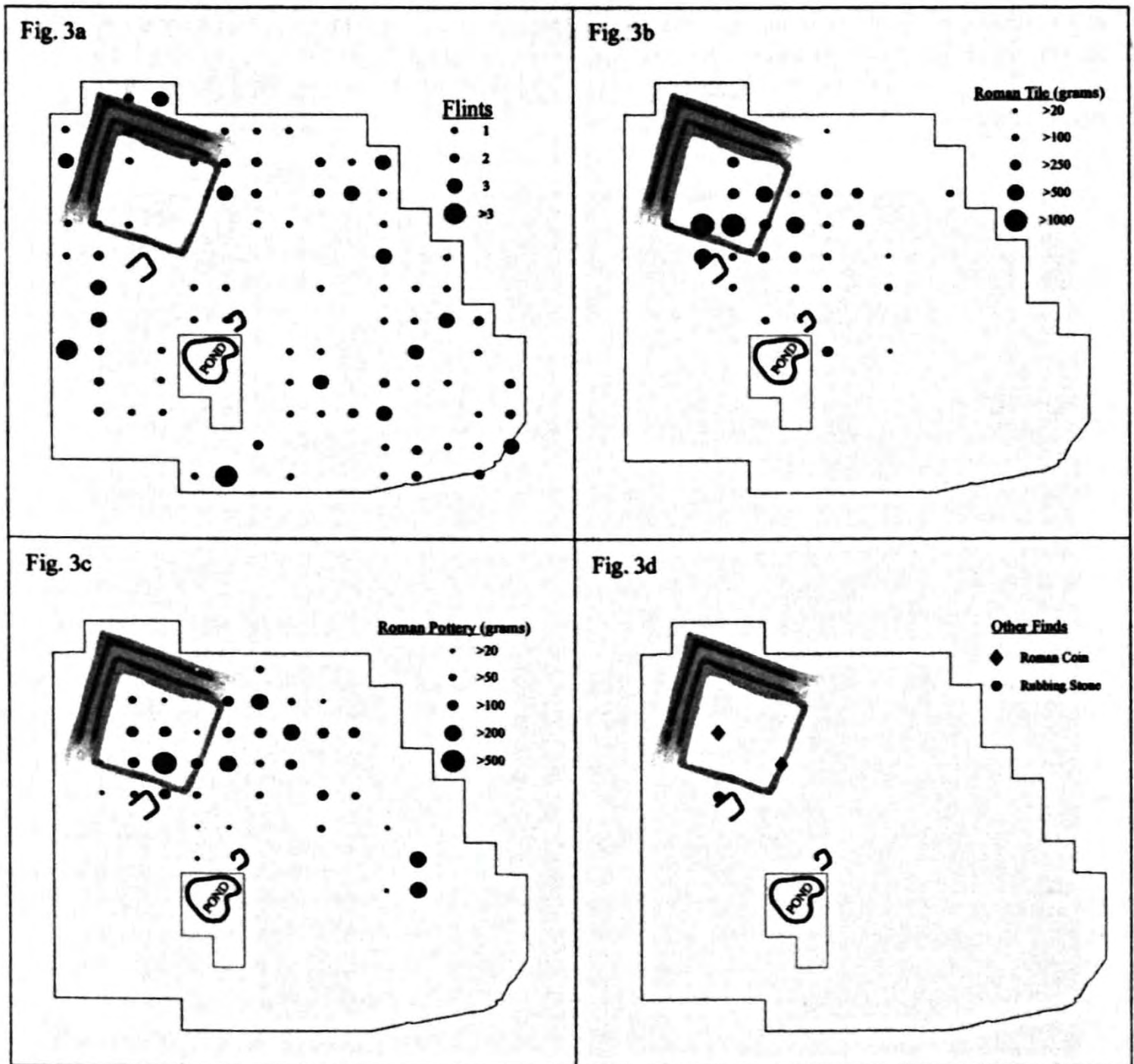
The new survey included a geophysical survey of the main enclosure and a surface survey of the area comprising the enclosure and the buildings immediately to the south-east. The whole area was laid out in 20-m squares aligned on the Ordnance Survey grid (Fig. 1). Each square was intensively walked and all visible artefacts were recovered. The primary intention of the surface survey was to obtain dating evidence. In addition, it was hoped that the location of buildings could be pinpointed, although the use of large grid squares made the precise identification of building locations more difficult. Conditions for the survey were good. The field had been recently ploughed and harrowed, thereby enabling a substantial recovery of finds. However, the main enclosure lies on slightly rising ground and deeper topsoil in the southern part of the site may have influenced recovery rates. Copies of the detailed report can be found in the Gloucestershire Sites and Monuments Record.

Surface survey

A large number of finds were recovered from the site including lithics, pottery and other artefacts. The finds will be placed in the Corinium Museum, Cirencester. One hundred and fourteen fragments of lithics were collected, many of them small and undiagnostic. They came from both chalk and gravel sources, including the Thames valley and the Marlborough Downs.¹ The majority of flints were flakes and blades. Diagnostic pieces included a possible Mesolithic blade, a broken adze of the Neolithic, a small Neolithic leaf-shaped arrowhead, and a possible Bronze-Age thumbnail scraper. The distribution of the flint material (Fig. 3a) did not indicate any particular focus for the lithics and, although recent studies (e.g. Rodwell 1988) have discussed the possible roles of flint material on Roman sites, it is likely that such material is consistent with multi-period, but not necessarily settlement, activity. Other stone material (Fig. 3d) consisted of a number of possible pot-boilers and a large semi-spherical pebble of coarse sandstone (c. 15 cm in diameter), probably a rubber for a saddle quern. Such objects range widely in date from the Neolithic to the Iron Age.

The majority of pottery retrieved was Roman, although two sherds of probable late Iron-Age pottery, similarly to local examples from Bagendon (Clifford 1961), were recovered. Most of the Roman pottery consisted of greywares which were difficult to identify. In addition, there were large amounts of Dorset black-burnished ware, Oxford colour-coated ware, a few pieces of probable Oxford whiteware, Oxford mortaria, sherds of decorated Rhenish ware and one sherd of an uncertain type of amphora. The identifiable samian consisted mainly of Dragendorf 27 cups and Dragendorf 18/31 and 18/31R bowls. Of particular interest amongst the samian ware was a sherd found to have been heated to very high temperatures. The implication is that this piece may have been used as a metal-working crucible and that it would reward further study.

The distribution of Roman pottery was concentrated in the south-eastern corner of the main enclosure and the area to the east of it (Fig. 3b). The presence of a smaller cluster of material further to the south-east suggests a previously unrecorded building at that location. A large quantity of post-medieval pottery was retrieved close to a pond south-east of the enclosure and suggests that the pond is of late date. Only a single sherd of medieval pottery was found, a find consistent with non-settlement activity such as manuring. In addition to the pottery, a large amount of Roman tile was retrieved (Fig. 3c). The tiles' distribution mirrors that of the Roman pottery, possibly indicating the presence of substantial buildings in those areas. The material indicates the existence of a number of large buildings that might be associated with a villa or small settlement.



100 m

Fig. 3. Distribution of surface finds recovered at Hailey Wood Camp from 20-m squares over the sites of the main enclosure and smaller, possible buildings identified from aerial photographs: (a) flints (number per square); (b) Roman tile (weight in grams per square); (c) Roman pottery (weight in grams per square); (d) other finds.

Geophysical survey

The primary aim of the geophysics survey was to define the limits of the enclosure and detect any features, particularly buildings, within it. Employing the grid plan used for the field-walking survey resistivity readings were taken every 1 metre (See Fig. 1).² The survey revealed a number of possible features (Figs. 4 and 5). However, as with all such surveys the interpretation of the results remains provisional.

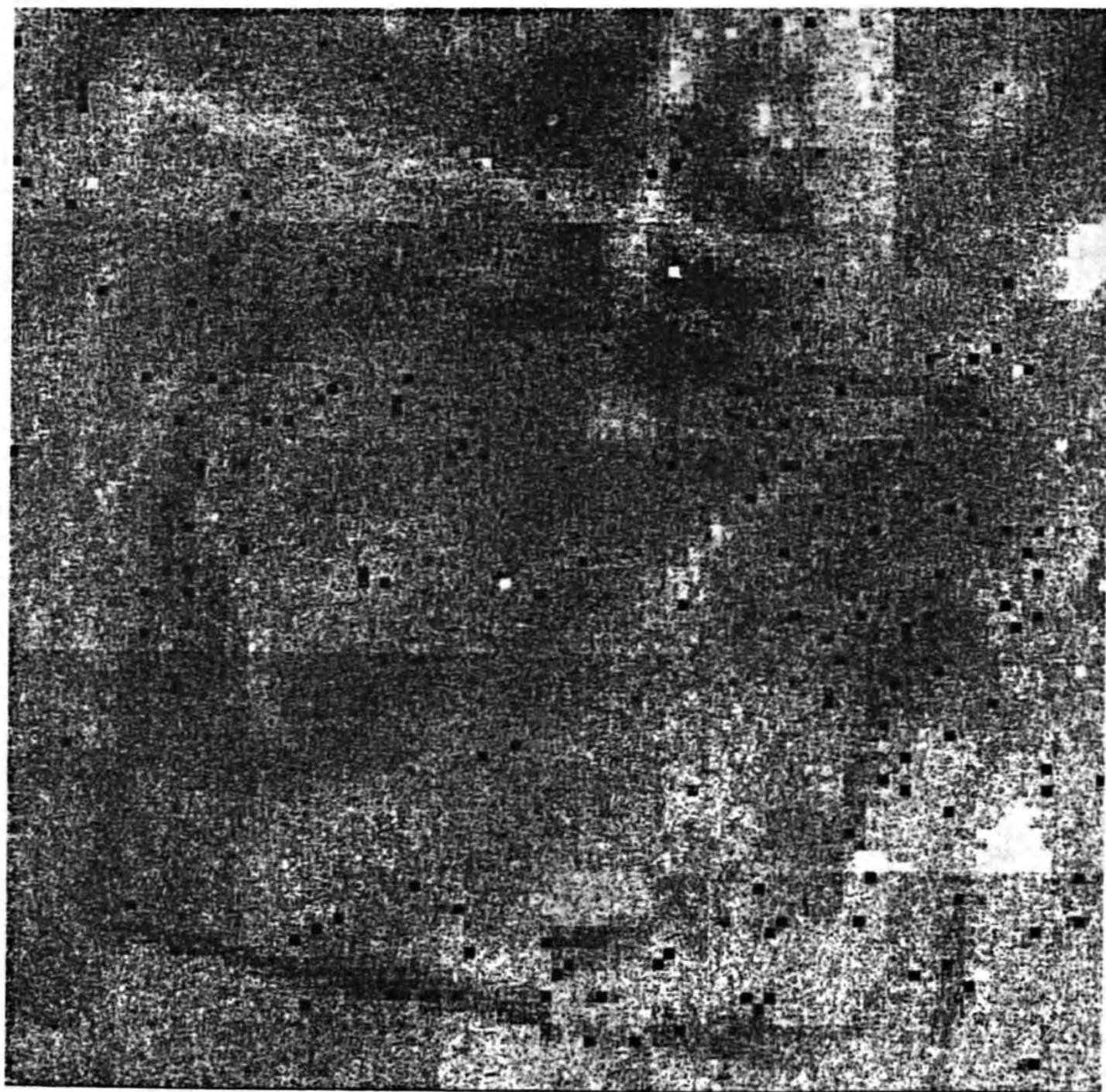


Fig. 4. Resistivity results at Hailey Wood Camp: the darker areas are those of higher resistance.

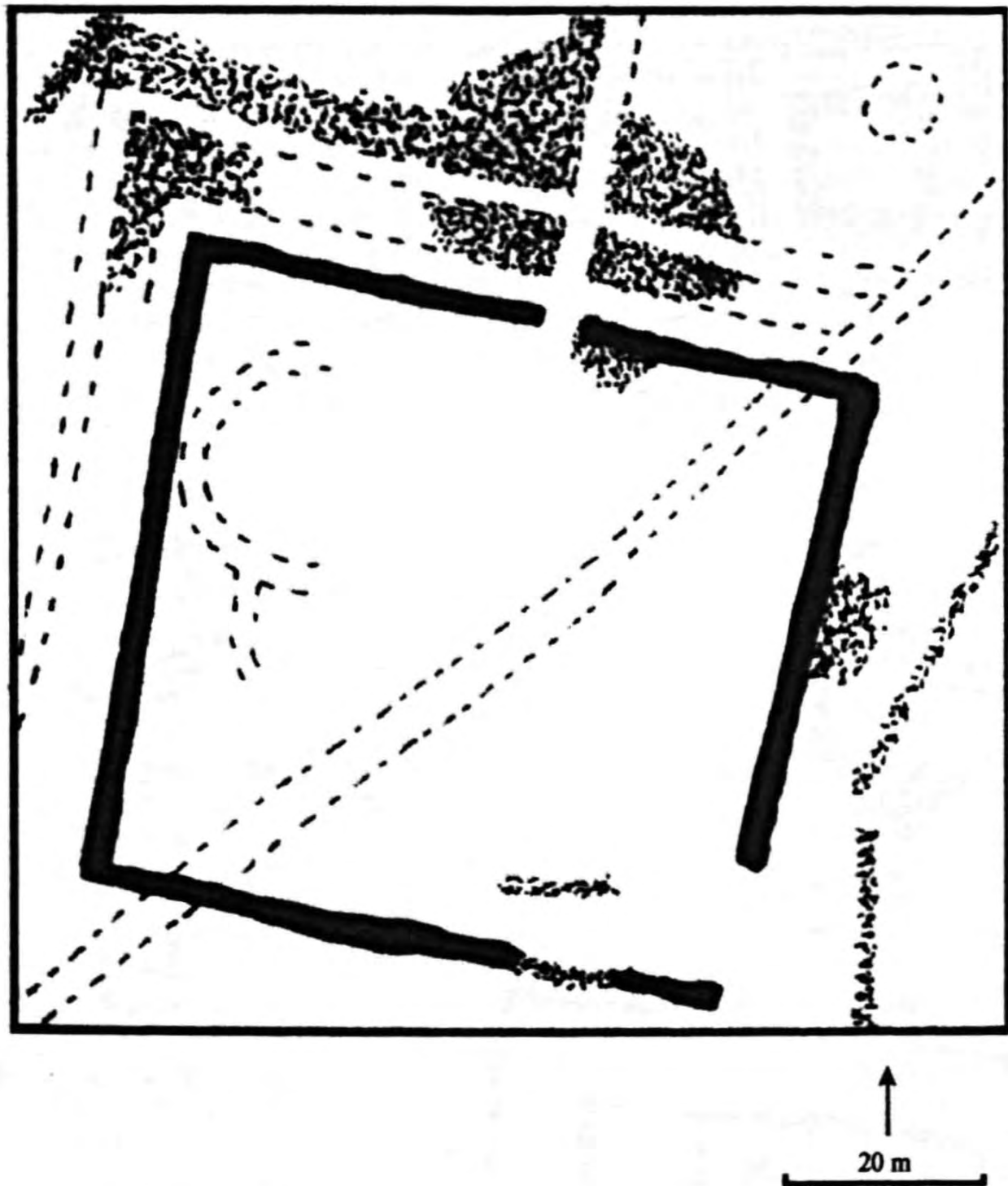
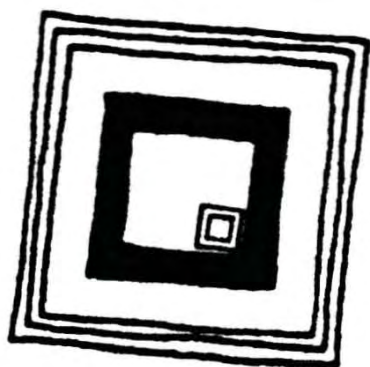
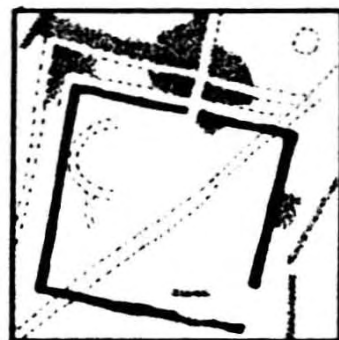


Fig. 5. Interpretation of geophysical survey of Hailey Wood Camp.

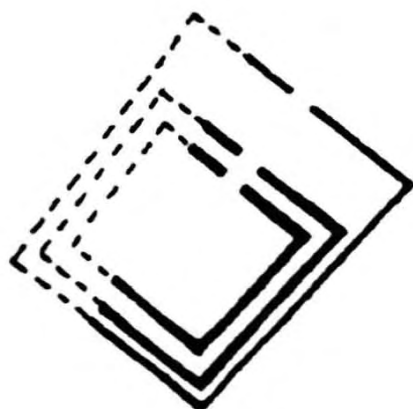
The survey results corresponded well to the aerial photographs in revealing a double-ditched enclosure encompassing a rectangular high-resistance feature. That feature may represent the remains of large wall foundations or a ploughed-out bank. The inner ditch of the enclosure was much fainter than the outer but its presence confirmed the form of the site as double-ditched, as suggested by aerial photographs. The outer ditch appeared to be on a slightly different alignment to the inner wall, something not obviously apparent from the photographs, and the difference suggests that the two were not necessarily contemporary. To the south-east of the enclosure there appeared to be other banks and walls with differing alignments and suggesting structures immediately outside the main enclosure.



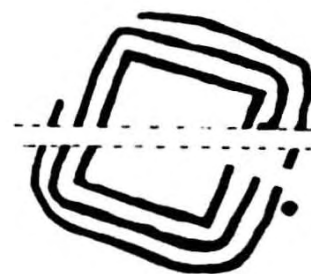
Gosbecks, Essex



Hailey Wood, Gloucestershire



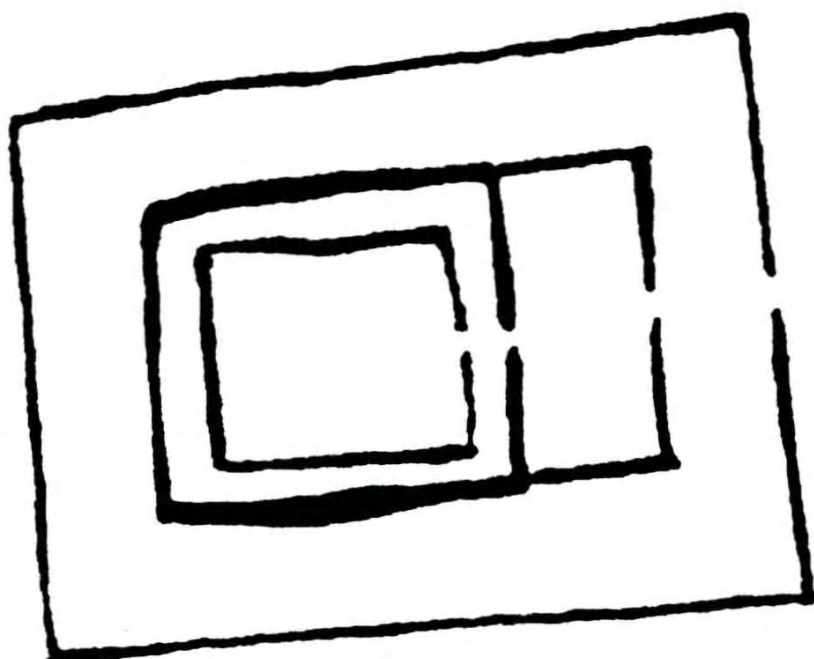
Aze, France



Lee's Rest, Oxfordshire



Hayling Island, Hampshire



Fison Way, Norfolk

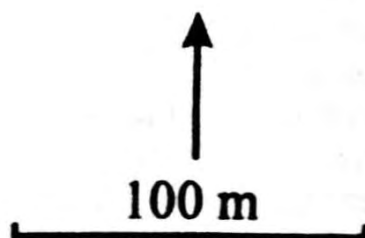


Fig. 6. Comparison of Hailey Wood Camp with other late Iron-Age and Roman ritual enclosures.

The entrance to the main enclosure may have existed towards the extreme south-east corner, where it may be represented by a gap in the inner bank. However, a linear feature of low resistivity was noted on the northern side of the enclosure. It ran roughly at a right angle to the enclosure and possibly intersected both the outer and inner ditches and the inner bank of the enclosure. It may be related to the feature described as a cambered road by O'Neill and O'Neill (1952) and possibly may represent some form of entrance. If this is the case the evidence contradicts the assumption by the Royal Commission's survey (RCHM 1976) that the enclosure's entrance was on its eastern side. To either side of the linear feature are areas of high resistance, possibly building foundations. The density of high readings adjacent to the intersection of the lower reading, possibly ditch features, is intriguing and may indicate buildings cut by later ditches.

There were a number of other, more indistinct, features. They included a low-resistivity line cutting diagonally across the main enclosure and possibly indicating a geological or linear feature of an earlier or later date than the enclosure. There appeared also to be a faint circular structure in the far north-eastern corner of the site. No distinct structure can be discerned within the enclosure.

Discussion

The lithic material and the probable saddle quern rubber imply early activity on the site, possibly dating from the Mesolithic onwards. It is uncertain whether the evidence represents permanent occupation of the site during those periods and further work is needed to determine if the material is consistent with background scatter representing 'offsite' activity. The two sherds of later Iron-Age pottery may also suggest pre-Roman activity. However, the long tradition of use of late Iron-Age wares means that they do not necessarily indicate pre-Roman occupation. Two late Iron-Age coins, a Dobunnic C and a Dobunnic G, are also suspected to derive from the site (Colin Haselgrove pers. comm.) but, because of their uncertain provenance and the possible role of late Iron-Age coinage in Romano-British ritual practice (cf. Briggs *et al.* 1993), they do not confirm late Iron-Age occupation of the site.

The Roman pottery suggests occupation of the site from the late 1st century A.D. until the 4th century. The samian wares are of various dates but are concentrated in the later 1st and early 2nd centuries. The coarse wares include a high proportion of greywares, although the presence of Oxford colour-coated and Dorset black-burnished wares suggests continuity of occupation into the 4th century.³ Late Roman activity is also indicated by the discovery of two coins, one issued under Valentinian between 364 and 375 A.D. with the legend 'GLORIA ROMANORUM' and the other issued under Constantine I between 335 and 341 A.D.⁴ The dating evidence suggests occupation of the site throughout the Roman period and possible earlier (Iron-Age ?) activity on the site.

The ground plan of Hailey Wood Camp, particularly the sharp rectangular corners and double ditch, does not resemble any recognised form of Roman military site (RCHM 1993) and therefore hints that previous interpretation of the site as a Roman fort is unlikely. In addition, the site's size and form do not appear to resemble those of a villa. The enclosure also appears to be too small for an agglomerated, small settlement.

Close parallels for the site can be found in Roman sanctuaries. A number of temple complexes, including those at Gosbecks, Essex (Lewis 1966), and Hayling Island, Hampshire (Downing *et al.* 1980), have similar double-ditch enclosed areas, known as *temenos* (Fig. 6). The closest parallel for the site appears to be Lee's Rest, Charlbury, Oxfordshire, which consists of a multiple enclosure with a possible temple building in the south-east corner (Fig. 6) and from which a

head of Mercury was recovered (Paul Booth pers. comm.). The similarities in form between the two sites may indicate that Hailey Wood Camp also was a shrine or temple.

The evidence of associated buildings related to the main enclosure at Hailey Wood Camp is consistent with other Roman temple complexes. It can be paralleled at Uley (Woodward and Leach 1993), Wycomb (RCHM 1976, 124) and Nettleton, Wiltshire (Wedlake 1982). The discovery of the seven curse tablets mentioned above also suggests that the Hailey Wood site had a religious significance. Examination of those tablets by Roger Tomlin indicated that at least two mentioned the god Mercury in language similar to that on tablets from Uley (Tomlin pers. comm.). In addition Henig (1993, 4; 1994, 228) has recorded a piece of sculpture from the Sapperton area, a marble head, possibly from a statue of Diana or Venus. The provenance of that piece is uncertain, although it may derive from the Hailey Wood site.

The reason for a sanctuary in this location may be explained by the presence, to the south-east, of the source of the river Thames. Although the enclosure and the spring seem unrelated, the enclosure is at the head of the valley in which the spring rises and it is possible that there was a spring higher up the valley and closer to the enclosure in the Roman period. The Romans often built ritual centres close to important water features, particularly major river sources (Horne and King 1980). There is evidence of the worship of water sources at sanctuaries both in Britain, at Lydney (Lewis 1966), Wycomb (RCHM 1976), Buxton, Derbyshire (Rivet and Smith 1979, 354), and Bath (Cunliffe 1988), and in northern Gaul, at the source of the river Seine (Brunaux 1987; Aldhouse-Green 1999).

Conclusion

This article offers the hypothesis that Hailey Wood Camp was a sanctuary, possibly similar to those at Uley and Gosbecks. Although identifiable 'votive' finds were not recovered in the surface survey, the importance of such material in identifying ritual sites can be exaggerated (Gregory 1992). The lack of such material may also be due to the activity of metal detectorists. Hailey Wood Camp's proximity to the source of the Thames supports the contention that it may have been an important ritual centre. The surface and geophysical surveys illustrate the potential for further investigation of Hailey Wood Camp and indicate that the site was larger than previous surveys have suggested. More geophysics surveys may reveal other buildings and help establish the nature of those outside the main enclosure.

Acknowledgements

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Notes

1. Flint material identified by Graeme Walker, Cotswold Archaeological Trust.
2. Details of survey methods are given in the report in the Gloucestershire Sites and Monuments Record.
3. Identification confirmed by Neil Holbrook, Cotswold Archaeological Trust.
4. Roman coins identified by P.J. Casey, Durham University.

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